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ABSTRACT

National Debate Tournament (NDT) policy debate is in a state of crisis, suffering a steady and precipitous drop in participation. This decline is due not to external factors, but rather to problems and abuses unique to NDT policy debate. Its demise reflects a much broader problem, the abrogation of intellectual leadership in the activity. Coaches and judges have lost sight of the educational purpose of the activity; far too many now view debate strictly as a contest where trophies are won and lost. Contemporary forensic practices (such as the use of excessive speed, counter-intuitive arguments, and destructive theoretical constructs) have contributed to the demise of policy debate. Some measure of vitality can be restored to NDT debate by adopting a more activist theory of forensics, and by taking decisive actions capable of rectifying the evils of specialization, elitism, and gamesmanship. By remembering that debate is an educational activity and applying that awareness to coaching and judging responsibilities, the community can substantially improve the quality of this valuable type of intercollegiate debate. (Thirty-two references are attached.) (SR)

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IS IT TOO LATE TO SAVE POLICY DEBATE?

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IS IT TOO LATE TO SAVE POLICY DEBATE?*

National Debate Tournament (NDT) policy debate is in a "state of crisis" (Rowland & Deatherage, 1988, p. 246). By any measure, there has been a steady and precipitous drop in policy debate participation. Many major tournaments (e.g., Emory, Dartmouth, and Novice Nationals), which at one time attracted over one hundred teams, are now a third smaller in size. The total number of subscribing schools is at a modern low (Rhodes, 1988). Even more telling (since it reflects actual participation) is the decline in the number of teams attending the district tournaments and the number of schools participating at the National Debate Tournament. From 1984-1988, there were forty-two fewer teams in attendance at district tournaments (Phillips, 1988). In some areas, the decline in numbers has been so steep that it has resulted in the extinction of district tournaments. District Two, which had 8 members in 1984, is now dormant (Phillips, 1988). District Eight, which had 18 subscribers in 1984, has lost so many schools that no District Tournament could be held in 1989 (Phillips, 1988). If we look at the years 1981-1989, we see that 97 different institutions were represented at the National Debate Tournament (Henderson, 1989). Over thirty of those institutions are no longer subscribing or competing in policy debate (Phillips, 1989). To any objective observer it is clear from these figures that NDT debate is collapsing. Rowland (1988) is not

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engaging in hyperbole when he declares that "if the decline in participation continues (we have lost perhaps 100 out of the 200 programs that existed five or six years ago), NDT easily could die out, except for a few elite schools" (p. 1).

Even as NDT debate collapses, Rowland and Deatherage (1988) point out that "little attention has been paid to the systematic problems which discourage participation" (p. 246). A survey of the forensics literature finds virtually nothing, with the notable exception of the Rowland and Deatherage essay, written on the subject. While there have been a variety of public forums and convention programs addressing these problems, our community has taken little collective action to save policy debate. At many times it seems that we do not recognize the severity of the problem. An alarming number of forensic educators maintain that the loss of numbers is inconsequential; that it reflects the attrition of nominal programs that were never competitive, and policy debate will recover if we only stay the course. Others deflect the seriousness of the problem by identifying external factors responsible for the loss of membership and the decline in participation. Cheshier (1988), for example, refers to "increasing program costs (and high per student costs), decreasing departmental support as speech departments turn away from their historic 'public speaking' focus and toward a more abstract social science focus, and the decreasing willingness of tenure-track instructors to allocate the enormous time necessary to run successful national programs" (p. 1).

It is difficult to believe that such external factors are entirely responsible for the decline of NDT policy debate, given the fact that debate using other formats is alive and prospering. For example, value debate conducted under the auspices of the Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA), is flourishing all over the country. The number of schools

participating in CEDA tournaments has increased from an initial total of eighteen schools in 1971-1972 (Brownlee, 1984) to a total of 264 in 1987-1988 (Bartanen, 1988). The vast majority of schools now participating in CEDA were once active NDT members (Lee, Lee & Seeger, 1983). Moreover, one-person Lincoln-Douglas debate has increased in popularity so much so that consideration was given to offering a division of it at the National Debate Tournament. What all of this suggests is that the decline in NDT participation is not due to external factors, but rather to problems and abuses unique to NDT policy debate.

In this paper I will argue that much of our problem is self-imposed. Specifically, I will argue that the demise of NDT debate reflects a much broader problem, the abrogation of intellectual leadership in the activity. It is my contention that coaches and judges have lost sight of the educational purpose of the activity; far too many now view debate as strictly a contest where trophies are won and lost. In the first part of this essay I will examine how contemporary forensic practices have contributed to the demise of policy debate. In the second part of the essay, I will argue that we can help restore some measure of vitality to NDT debate if we are willing to adopt a more activist theory of forensics.

The Demise of Policy Debate

NDT policy debate is dying today because it has become a virtually "closed" activity. At one time, a heterogeneous mix of persons were involved in NDT policy debate. Participants included students with and without high school debate experience; coaches who were formerly college debaters, coaches who were formerly high school debate coaches, and coaches who were speech and argument teachers who began debate programs from

scratch. Today, the activity has become so specialized that only a very small group of students and coaches are able to compete in NDT policy debate.[1] Over the past several years, specialization of several kinds--the development of sophisticated debate theory literature, the emergence of arguments (both affirmative and negative) virtually devoid of real world relevance, and the increase in the rate of delivery to the point where few are even able to comprehend a debate--has functioned to severely limit the attractiveness of the activity to any audience. Hollihan, Baaske, and Riley (1987) rightly note that:

> academic debate has become an activity that those of us actively involved in it value, but which cannot be celebrated in the presence of our faculty colleagues, university administrators, community leaders, or even alumni if they graduated more than ten years ago. (p. 186)

Rowland and Deatherage (1988) concur noting that "to many observers the practices that are common in NDT debate seem absurd" (p. 247). Even former debaters (Pinkus, 1983; Snow 1987) have expressed serious reservations about contemporary trends in academic debate practices. Unfortunately, given the current state of affairs, there is no reason for believing that policy debate will be able to attract newcomers or to persuade those involved in other forms of debate to convert to NDT debate. In all likelihood, the number of schools participating in policy debate will grow even smaller, especially if the trend

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[1]The number of students qualifying for the NDT without significant high school experience has been growing smaller each decade, according to Matlon and Keele's (1984) survey of NDT participants.

toward specialization continues.[2] It may soon reach the point where NDT policy debate will be exclusively a "sport of kings" (Cutbirth, 1986, p. 13).

In recent years, concerns over participation have tended to focus on tournament practices (see, for example, Decker & Morello, 1984; Bart, 1988; Cheshier, 1988; Herbeck, 1988; Herbeck & Katsulas, 1988) or entry barriers. While these are undoubtedly factors contributing to the demise of NDT debate, I wish to argue that a more fundamental problem is responsible for the sorry state of NDT debate. It is my contention that a large part of the demise of policy debate can be founded in the fact that contemporary forensic coaches have adopted a vastly different pedagogical outlook than did their predecessors. In earlier days, forensic coaches viewed debate as an extension of their classroom teaching experience. Debate was a curricular activity created for the primary purpose of teaching students how to argue effectively. Judges and coaches imposed a preconceived set of standards for what constituted sound argumentation. Debaters who deviated from these norms would receive expert feedback from judges and coaches recommending ways of making their cases and negative positions conform to sound argumentative principles. If during a debate one side initiated blatantly unsound arguments or theory positions, it was the responsibility of the judge

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[2]Fritch (1989) has observed that it will be increasingly difficult for schools to justify funding policy debate if it becomes divorced from real world policy argument. Dempsey and Hartmann's (1986) warning that "pursuit of some radically specialized form of debate simply because of its isomorphic fit to a purified argumentation paradigm may render it unfundable as a co-curricular activity" (p. 174) should be taken seriously.

as an educator to vote against that team, regardless of whether their opposition was technically proficient enough to beat them on the flow sheet. It was in that pedagogical spirit that A. C. Baird (1950), of the University of Iowa, advocated penalizing debaters who insisted "that 'should' implies merely theoretical desirability but carries no requirement of practicability" and/or who used "peculiar" analysis "seemingly devised to throw the other team off guard" (p. 363). Judges believed it was more important to discourage unsound and uneducational practices than to reward the performance of technically proficient debaters. The fear existed that if judges started voting for technique over substance, debate arguments would "tend to become ever more esoteric, elaborate, and far-fetched" (Ehninger, 1958, p. 133).

A profound change in attitude is evident today. Many forensic coaches and judges appear more concerned with enforcing competitive fairness than with promoting educational standards. According to Rowland and Deatherage (1988), "judges have focused on fairly resolving debates, while largely ignoring the educational effects of some of the practices that refusing to intervene was encouraging" (p. 248). Judges now view their role as that of a neutral referee charged with processing the subject matter of the debate. This philosophy of judging has come to be known as *tabula rasa*. The spread of this attitude has been justified on two accounts: promoting diversity of thought and ensuring competitive fairness through judge objectivity. Ulrich (1987) explains:

> *Tabula rasa* is consistent with an important goal of debate--encouraging intellectual experimentation--since it permits all issues to be open to discussion. New theories can be introduced and old one's modified. This invites debaters to understand the reasons behind theoretical positions. Instead of arguing that

> inherency is a voting issue, speakers are required to understand why inherency is important and what functions inherency performs. The *tabula rasa* approach also creates a sense of fairness, since both teams know that the judge will be open to all of their arguments. (p. 38)

For these reasons, most judges have adopted a *tabula rasa* philosophy (Matlon & Cross, 1978; Freeley, 1981; Rowland, 1984) and I believe that as a result of this, there has been a proliferation of argument specialization and esotericism in NDT policy debate.

As more and more judges have ceased imposing educational standards on debate arguments, gamesmanship elements (i.e., excessive speed, counter-intuitive arguments, destructive theoretical constructs) have been utilized with greater frequency by debaters. A number of critics of the *tabula rasa* perspective (Cutbirth, 1983; Dempsey, 1983; Dempsey & Hartmann, 1986; Dowling, 1981) predicted this would happen. Knowing that judges would passively sit back and approach all arguments in a credulous fashion, debaters have tested their patience by advocating increasingly abusive theories and preposterous arguments. Experienced debaters have quickly learned that they can overwhelm most of their opponents by employing speed, unusual theory, or counterintuitive arguments. By rewarding debaters who utilize such tactics, judges have encouraged other debaters to copy them until they eventually have come to be viewed as legitimate strategies in the forensic community. Such judge passivity is responsible today for the decline in the

quality of debate arguments and the promotion of esoteric theory having little educational utility.[3]

Coaches must also share some responsibility for the excesses of debaters. In many instances, the coaches, not the debaters, are the ones who came up with the unorthodox positions and twisted theory arguments. Moreover, there is an amazing amount of hypocrisy in the forensic community. Distressingly, few coaches seem willing to enforce adherence to their own educational convictions. I could cite countless examples of coaches who complain bitterly about the state of the activity in public forums, while at the same time, their own teams are perpetrating the very crimes they decry as being abusive. It does the activity little good for such coaches to criticize the fast rate of speed, the abuse of evidence, the abusive advocacy of generic arguments, and the like if their own debaters continue employing such practices.

While lax enforcement of educational quality by both judges and coaches contributes to specialization of the worst kind, the forensic community has done little to discourage this trend because its leaders

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[3]Matlon and Keele (1984) found that former NDT participants perceived there to be a decline in argument quality and an increase in esotericism. They report that "By decade, the following beliefs are clear: that the use of jargon is on the increase, that unrealistic and spurious arguments are on the increase, that lack of synthesis of thought is more noticeable, that quantity over quality is apparent, and that too much reliance on evidence at the expense of developed arguments surfaces more in the last decade" (pp. 203-204).

perceive that such specialization serves to perpetuate elite dominance over the activity. Despite the fact that NDT policy debate has lost well over half its membership in the past few years, there have been virtually no changes made in the way the activity operates. While several public forums have been conducted on the subject, the NDT Committee seems paralyzed, and few tournament directors or coaches seem willing to unilaterally act to save NDT debate.[4] The time for adopting meaningful reform is long over-due. Thus far, the only response to the declining participation has been for leading members of the forensic community to wax eloquent, to sign petitions, and to form study commissions. Not surprisingly, this has done little to revive the activity. NDT policy debate cannot survive for much longer unless significant steps are taken to make the activity more open to newcomers.

Can We Save Policy Debate?

If we are to save policy debate as a viable activity, we must be willing to take bold steps to regain control of the activity. Specifically, we need to develop a new forensic philosophy which recognizes that debate is an academic game designed to further specific educational objectives. Arguments, competitive practices, and tournament procedures which run counter to this conception of debate need to be changed. Consistent with this thinking, I believe that a number of substantive changes need to be made for policy debate to survive and prosper in the future.

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[4]Indeed, one of the few positive efforts at reform has been an effort by the NDT Board of Trustees to promote "rookie" debate.

If we are to improve the quality of argumentation, forensic educators must be willing to enforce educational standards on the activity. This would require a change both in the way in which we prepare debaters and evaluate debates. With respect to coaching, it would require that we impose the same educational standards on our debaters that we eloquently espouse in our professional writings and associations. Such constructive role-modeling is absent today, as was documented in Matlon and Keele's (1984) survey of former NDT participants. It found that "there is a recurring caution expressed in several places that directors set a standard for the ethical integrity of arguments and to teach students the objectives of honest, rational, real-world arguments and to stop game-playing" (p. 202). The implication of such a change in thinking about the nature of debate is clear. If we believe that debaters talk too fast, then we need to encourage our own debaters to speak at a more appropriate rate of speed. Rather than bitterly complaining about certain types of arguments, we need to convince our debaters that better argumentative alternatives exist. To put it simply, meaningful change in debate practice will not occur until we clean our own houses. A necessary first step in a program to reform policy debate is for coaches to ensure that their own teams debate in an exemplary fashion.

This same commitment to promoting sound argumentative practices should be rigorously adhered to by judges. Rather than serving as neutral referees, we should take on the role of active judge critics. From this role, we should use our own expertise to encourage quality argumentation. As Dowling (1981) notes: "expertise must be used as an active, highly selective cognitive filter which does not allow the critic to accept any argument that violates universal standards of validity or adequacy" (p. 237). At a minimum, we should require clear presentation, development and explanation of all

arguments, and if evidence is used, the author and specific qualifications should be presented. When we hear bad arguments, we should not be afraid to call them bad arguments. For too long, judges have let the debaters set the agenda for what is permissible, assuming that bad arguments would eventually lose favor. The time has come to abandon this philosophy as it no longer serves our pedagogical interests. Instead of abrogating control for assessing a debate, we should enforce educational standards on the activity.[5] This sort of activist stance was described by Dempsey and Hartmann (1986) when they wrote:

> Where judges of academic debate view the educational values of debate being threatened by the perpetuation of certain practices, even when these practices have been adequately defended in a given round, they too have an obligation to intervene. (p. 172)

Such selective intervention, which rewards high quality argumentation, will rapidly improve the quality of argumentation in policy debate.

It is likely that many in the policy debate community will find this idea either objectionable or even outright offensive. While it would be impossible to answer all of the criticisms against the positions developed in this essay, I do feel a need to respond to the claims that this proposal is both unfair and unnecessary, as these are the standard criticisms voiced against such

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[5]This does not mean that I would favor wanton judge intervention on every argument in every debate. It does mean, however, that I believe judges should be more willing to impose their own minimum standards on arguments and practices within a debate. For a more detailed treatment of the proper scope of such intervention, see Muir & Panetta (1987).

proposals. These objections are conceptually distinct, and so I will respond to each in turn.

The claim to fairness is grounded in the mistaken belief that debate is nothing more than a game. Those who hold this position claim that judges should not intervene in the debate process, as such intervention is necessarily unfair to one side in the debate. While it is true that a particular judge's conception of debate may work to the benefit of one team, I feel that judges have an obligation, even a duty, to enforce educational standards on the activity. It is difficult to understand why many professionals in debate are reluctant to accept this premise, given that many of these same educators routinely impose stringent guidelines in their classrooms. In public speaking classes, for example, teachers frequently require students to give particular types of speeches (e.g., persuasive, informative, ceremonial, etc.). Would such a teacher be guilty of violating academic freedom if he/she failed a student for giving a eulogy speech on an assignment which called for a persuasive speech? Would this same teacher be guilty if he/she failed a student for giving his/her speech in Chinese? Probably not. Why then is it troubling for us as educators to require students to advocate sound arguments and theory positions? As Hollihan, Baaske, and Riley (1987) argue:

> No one expects a professor to be totally neutral in evaluating a student's classwork, some positions have more currency than others for a variety of academic reasons. Professors are asked to apply their expertise in evaluating their student's performance, and thus provide their students with the benefits of this expertise, we should ask for no less from debate judges. (p. 190)

Given that debate judges are experts in debate, I see no reason why they should be afraid to use that expertise to improve the quality of the activity.

Second, there is no reason why arguments or theoretical constructs which are inherently uneducational should be tolerated. Claims which are constructed from evidence fragments, counterintuitive reasoning, causal oversimplification, and hyperbole are bad arguments. The debate judge, as a professional critic of argument, should label them as such. As for theoretical issues, Rowland (1984) appropriately notes that discussion of certain theoretical issues--e.g., arguments claiming topicality is not a voting issue, arguments defending the unethical use of evidence, arguments proposing alterations in format--would undermine the educational foundation of debate.

Finally, if judges are worried that this would give an unfair advantage to a team which might be more familiar with their preferences, a variety of steps could be taken to acquaint the debaters with the judge. It would be easy, for example, for a judge to answer questions prior to the debate. Along the same lines, Rowland and Deatherage (1988) claim that "the provision of judging philosophies would provide debaters with advance warning about judging predispositions" (p. 250). Feedback after the debate, both oral and written, would also help acquaint debaters with the judge for future reference.

In addition to claiming that such thinking is unfair, others will object to my argument on the grounds that that this sort of "radical" reform is unnecessary. I believe that this objection is equally untenable. While I wish that I could share in the belief that policy debate is thriving, a more realistic assessment is that policy debate is on the brink of extinction. Those who argue that we should plod on, confident that we will regain our lost teams and programs, fail to understand that institutions left policy debate for a reason. Schools switched to alternative formats because the educational learning philosophy embodied in policy debate fell into disfavor. While

many of these fine institutions may never return to policy debate, it is certain that none will return until we make meaningful changes in our coaching, judging, and tournament procedures. We have lost our ability to claim that a majority of forensic educators subscribe to the ideals represented in policy debate. Rather than waiting for the remaining schools to leave, those of us who believe that policy debate is important must be prepared to take bold steps to revitalize the activity.

I believe that NDT policy debate is approaching the edge of demise. However, I also believe that aggressive action can restore some of its vitality. While we might never return to the glory days of old when most of the colleges and universities in this country competing in debate opted for this form, I do believe that we can revitalize interest and participation in NDT policy debate. Such a recovery, however, requires that we take decisive actions capable of rectifying the evils of specialization, elitism, and gamesmanship. By remembering that debate is an educational activity and applying that awareness to our coaching and judging responsibilities, I believe that the community can substantially improve the quality of this valuable type of intercollegiate debate.

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